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Forcing the Archive: Involuntary Migrants ‘of Ceylon’ in the Indian Ocean World of the 18th-19th Centuries

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Abstract

This ~~paper~~-article examines some marginal stories of subaltern individuals shipped and trans-shipped between the Dutch and British colonial territories of Ceylon, Mauritius and the Cape in the 18th and 19th centuries. After addressing the difficulties in retrieving traces of their lives and the ambiguities of categories of classification, ~~the~~^{is} article offers insights into everyday cultural ties forged among diverse groups and looks into acts of resistance of individuals ‘of Ceylon’. The experience of Ceylonese or individuals described as ‘of Ceylon’ not only gives insights into the various forms of mobility that shaped the making of societies in the Indian Ocean world, it also helps us capture the remarkable capacity of some of these involuntary migrants to forge fragile communities, preserve practices of meaning and resist the predations of slave owners. The snapshots we offer of people ‘of Ceylon’ can refine our understanding of the way imperial designs affected the lives of dominated people across territories in the Indian Ocean. They also make more explicit the link between the global and the local and how larger processes such as slavery are broken down and lived at the local level.

Keywords : Migration; slavery ; labour migrants; archive ; Ceylon, Indian Ocean

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Introduction

Historians, social anthropologists and archeologists of the Caribbean have brought new insights in the last two decades into the socialities of enslaved people from inventive readings of thin sources, oral, written and material.¹ In the same vein, recent discoveries in the depths of the colonial archives have helped to refashion the narrative of involuntary migrants from South Asia who are beginning to be seen as individuals and communities in their own right rather than as the anonymous collective representatives of forced diasporas of convicts and slaves. Building on previous scholarship based on slave testimonies albeit via the layers of transcription, translation and representation through which they come to us, reconstructing experiences of enslaved people offers some valuable possibilities².

This paper examines some marginal stories of subaltern individuals shipped and trans-shipped between the Dutch and British colonial territories of Ceylon, Mauritius and the Cape in the 18th and 19th centuries. The experience of Ceylonese or individuals described as ‘of Ceylon’ not only gives insights into the various forms of mobility that shaped the making of societies in the Indian Ocean world it also helps us capture the remarkable capacity of some of these involuntary migrants to forge fragile communities, preserve practices of meaning and resist the predations of slave owners. Rather than romanticize the actions of subalterns we attempt to understand the being and becoming of enslaved and transported individuals, that historians are trying to retrieve from a recalcitrant archive that has until now either ignored them, drowned them in figures of trade or read them as ‘socially dead’. In consequence the counter-narrative of individuals and groups who forged ties across time and place, and who created cultural spaces within which their self-worth and

collective sense of community was expressed and nurtured, has remained a largely untold story.

The partiality of the colonial archive towards elites and subalterns whose numbers warrant mention has not favoured smaller groups such as people hailing from Ceylon caught up in the webs of slavery and convict transportation. Historians need to force the archive to retrieve some notion of their lives that appear most often at the margins, as secondary figures in plots, thrown into partaking in extraordinary circumstances as Carlo Ginsburg famously suggested. The snapshots we offer in this paper of people ‘of Ceylon’ can however refine our understanding of the way imperial designs affected the lives of dominated people across territories in the Indian Ocean.

Being ‘of Ceylon’ in the Indian Ocean world: -slaves, free blacks and convicts

The Dutch VOC colonial archive is replete with references to individuals, anonymous but sometimes named as well, who are described as ‘of Ceylon’. This section will look into the ambiguities of their identities and suggest that in most cases the term ‘of Ceylon’ refers not to the place of birth but to the last port of call.

Ceylon port cities

On arriving in the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth century the Dutch came into contact with pre-existing indigenous Asian slave-owning societies in South-east Asia, India and Ceylon, and from the outset made use of slave labour to construct their forts and factories in the region. Over the course of the century, tens of thousands of slaves were procured by the VOC from the Indian subcontinent, first primarily from the Coromandel coast and the Bengal-Arakan region, later also from the Malabar coast, especially the important coastal settlement of Cochin, and Ceylon. Most were destined for Batavia and other locations in the Indonesian

archipelago, but later in the century the Cape Colony and Ceylon became important markets. Slaves purchased in South India and transported to Ceylon might then be re-shipped to other Dutch settlements such as the Cape and Mauritius.³ African slaves made the reverse journey, from the Cape and Mauritius to Ceylon and other parts of Asia.⁴ Although the trade in Indian slaves declined noticeably during the eighteenth century, it has been suggested that around 100,000 slaves, and possibly more, were taken from this region by the Dutch.⁵

Within the VOC shipping network, the ports of Colombo and Galle in Ceylon were second in importance only to Batavia. The port settlements of Ceylon were crucial spaces where Dutch ships called en route between the Western and Eastern Indian Ocean⁶. The traffic between the Coromandel coast and Colombo was particularly significant: in 1705-6, 103 vessels arrived there.⁷ Until the early 18th century the majority of Europeans in Colombo worked for the VOC and over fifty percent of the population were Company slaves who worked on fortifications and in agriculture. The number of slaves however decreased from 1,993 in 1681 to 694 in 1767 due to efforts by the Company to economize⁸.

Most of the slaves brought to the port cities of Ceylon were in transit as figures from the database Boekhouder Generaal Batavia (Bookkeeper General Batavia) testify. Occasionally some additional information is inserted in the cargo lists of the ships. On 13th June 1704 the *Matroos* arrived in Colombo with a cargo of 45 male slaves from the Malabar coast in transit to Batavia. ‘Of these, one slave died in the Colombo hospital, while three others remained sick there; another slave had run away’⁹.

The VOC’s outposts at the Cape and on Mauritius were supplied with Asian slaves dispatched from Batavia or Colombo on the annual return fleets. Some slaves

appear to have originated in Ceylon itself, but their ethnicity is uncertain. In 1712, for example, 36 slaves arrived at the Cape from Jafnapatnam in Ceylon; in 1719 another 80 arrived from the same place, and there was a further shipment in 1754.¹⁰ In this early period slaves from the Indian subcontinent made up around half of the entire slave workforce, with slaves from Ceylon itself contributing 2 – 3%.¹¹ Of the Ceylon slaves, around half have a more specific place of origin mentioned – for example, Bibile, Galle, Satrapatnam and Jafnapatnam. Between 1715 and 1806 the proportion of Ceylon slaves increased to around 4%; however, according to Shell, ‘in the second half of the 18th century, the smaller numbers of Ceylon fleets and ships within fleets from both Sri Lanka and India led to a decline in the proportion of slaves imported from the Indian subcontinent.’¹²

Ambiguous identities of slaves ‘of Ceylon’

The ascribed first name and place of origin identifying these slaves as ‘of Ceylon’, and sometimes including a more specific location, such as Colombo, does not necessarily indicate that this was their birthplace. In some cases it may be that the identifier ‘van Ceijlan’ is simply an indicator of the last port of call of the slave. This would suggest that a slave from Bibile – an inland area - is more likely to be indigenous to Ceylon than one from Galle or Colombo, the two main ports of call. There is only scanty evidence about the origin of slaves brought to Colombo to work in the city or shipped to another destination. An exception revealing the status of slaves as commodities in the same fashion as tools or horses is the quarterly lists of deceased or missing slaves debited from recorded Company asset books¹³. These reveal that slaves came primarily from Malabar and to a lesser extent from Coromandel, Bengal and Batavia, including many of those brought ‘from Ceylon.’¹⁴

The voyage of Christopher Schweitzer from Wurtemberg who spent time in Ceylon in the 1670s has left an interesting account of his wealthy ‘Cingulaish’ landlady at Colombo and her ‘twenty Slaves from Bengal which she used very inhumanly’. According to his account they had been bequeathed to her by John Christantz, her merchant husband and a ship owner who traded with India.¹⁵ More than a century later it is evident that slaves obtained from India and Africa were still being traded in Ceylon.¹⁶

As a minority group in the VOC outposts, slaves with an ascribed Ceylonese origin tended to be dispersed in ones and twos among employers. A typical slave workforce as enumerated in the estate of Arend Josias van Breda and Elizabeth Petronella Ehlers indicates the presence of a single Ceylon slave – David, a labourer aged 52 - among a diverse 17-strong workforce composed of Africans, Indians and South East Asians.¹⁷ In the absence of detailed census records for slaves in the Dutch Cape colony, sometimes the only trace of the life of a Ceylonese slave is revealed from lists of work gangs or ownership records. For example, Ziena van Ceijlon is mentioned as being among a slave gang at the Klapmuts slave post, while Leander of Ceylon appears in the record as a slave of Johannes Pol. The same slave, or one with the same name, also appears in a transaction dated 1698 which transferred him from Lambert Cleijn, skipper of the *Schoondijke*, to Henning Husing for Rds 50. Slave sales often occurred when individual owners were leaving the colony. In 1689, for example, Maria from Punte de Gale, was manumitted by Pieter Mollier ‘sailing on De Schelde’ while Florinda from Jafnapatnam was sold by Adrianus de Vooght to Nathaniel Goethardt, junior merchant sailing on the *Hollantsen Thuy*n, for Rds 70. Many slaves at the Cape were in fact ‘remigrants’ having served their owners at other Dutch settlements in the Indian Ocean, such as

Ceylon, Batavia or Mauritius, and were sold on at the last port of call, as it were, by those on homeward-bound voyages. This was due both to the fact that profits could be made by sales effected at the Cape, and the difficulties of bringing slaves into European ports.

The Ambiguity of Convict and 'Free Black' Identities

Slaves were not the only involuntary Asian immigrants in Dutch Indian Ocean settlements. The shipment of convicts from Batavia and Ceylon to the Cape and from there to Mauritius dates from the late 17th century. The subject has not yet been researched exhaustively, but preliminary studies indicate a likely overall figure of between 500 and 800, among whom were ex-slaves, Muslims, Sinhalese Christians and others.¹⁸ While some individuals - such as Nicolas Ondaatje - were transported for petty and unspecified criminal activities, others were political prisoners and colonial resisters, some of high status who travelled with retinues and families, and who acquired followers wherever they were sent. Clearly such individuals and groups defy easy categorization and if we can define them as subalterns by virtue of their marginality and expulsion, they further demonstrate the complexity of such categories in the early Indian Ocean colonial world. The influence of such individuals in fostering a counter-culture, and the expense of maintaining them, was viewed with unease by the Cape authorities who were accordingly not unwilling to allow them to return home. For example, the Sinhalese *vidane* of the Kuruwita *korale*, Tittampuwa Apame, banished to the Cape in 1677 'in consequence of the large number of his adherents and seditious spirit' was allowed to return to Ceylon, some twenty years later, much to the displeasure of the Batavian authorities.¹⁹

The diversity in status and treatment of the convicts can be shown by the fact that some Ceylonese convicts were incarcerated on the notorious Robben Island, while others enjoyed relative freedom. The Cape authorities were informed, in 1695, that a *yogi* (ascetic) who had falsely claimed to be the brother of the King of Kandy should be allowed 'to go about everywhere to earn his living, but should he be unable to do so, you may give him something for his support, but not keep him in bonds, or let him work as a convict, as our object in banishing him was merely to prevent the trouble and inconvenience which his stay here would cause.'²⁰

As with the slaves, the fact that the convicts were despatched from Ceylon does not necessarily indicate that this was their birthplace. The higher status the individual, the better we are able to identify them, of course. In the case of the Muslim priest Sheikh Joseph, who was sent to the Cape from Ceylon in 1694 with 49 of his followers and died on 23 May 1699, contemporary accounts assert that he was a 'Macassar or Galeran nobleman' and a relative of the King of Bantam in Java, who was sent into exile by the Dutch, first to Ceylon and then to the Cape, to render the prospect of his return to Asia less likely.²¹ A number of other exiles or convicts who later became leading members of the Muslim community at the Cape are more difficult to identify. For example an early religious leader is described in some records as Frans van Bengalen and in others as Francois van Ceylon, while the father of Sartjie van de Kaap who married Imam Achmat of Bengal is described as 'free black Coridon van Bengalen' in certain documents, such as the transfer deed of his property, whereas in his will, made in 1795, he is described as a 'native of Ceylon.'²² The latter suggests that some slaves might have made the reverse journey, from Ceylon to Bengal, before trans-shipment to the Cape.

As colonial conquest brought British rule to the former Dutch and French Indian Ocean settler states, so migrants continued to be shunted across the evolving national boundaries, their destinies and roles shaped increasingly by economic transformations rather than political manoeuvres. For women, as Indrani Chatterjee has noted, 'the patterns of circulation ... within which [they] were enmeshed made all categories of origin and use appear static and inappropriate. For instance, when soldiers of the Crown's regiments returned to England, as the 66th and 78th did in 1817, 'their' women, brought over from Ceylon to Bengal, were inherited by the soldiers of the 59th stationed at Fort William.'²³ A few high ranking Ceylonese continued to be exiled – notably Ehelepola to Mauritius in the 1820s – but increasingly convict transportation became less about distancing troublesome natives and more about supplying workers to labour-hungry export crop producers.²⁴

The fifteen Ceylonese convicts [including one woman] transported to Mauritius in 1824, were all Sinhalese, apart from two persons originally from Batavia, and one Dutch-Sinhalese. One was a Dutch-Sinhalese clerk named Herman Maas, transported for forgery; three were transported for murder, three for attempted murder and three for 'military offences'. The woman convict, Hude, was tried with her husband, daughter, Hamy, and son in law for burying alive Hamy's new born twins. Hamy and her husband were acquitted, but Hude and her husband were sentenced to hang - later commuted to transportation for life.²⁵

The more detailed records available for these 19th century transportees enable us to ascertain their 'ceylonese' identities more readily. Conversely, free blacks or manumitted slaves described as 'of Ceylon' are virtually impossible to identify by ethnicity or birthplace because they generally have only one name,

together with the 'origin tag'. African, Malagasy, Indian or Indonesian might all be described simply as 'Zwarten' at the Cape²⁶. The proportion of Free blacks 'of Ceylon' at the Cape colony varied from 4.95% of the adult free black community in 1705 to 7.7% in 1735 and 3.3 % in 1770.²⁷ Their manumission records occasionally provide some clues to ethnicity and status. David of Ceylon, for example, manumitted his female slave Lena of Ceylon in 1759, a little slave boy named Jacobus Cornelis of the Cape, and a male slave named Adolph between 1768 and 1770. He also freed his female slave Agatha of Macassar, whom he recognized as his partner or 'concubine' in 1783.²⁸ Female members of the free black Ceylonese community were usually ex-slaves. Sara from Ceylon was manumitted by Ouwel Jansen, skipper of the *Voorsigtigheijt* and given the option of returning to Batavia or remaining at the Cape. She chose to stay and married Claas Gerrits from Bengal who was also manumitted in the same year. They had four children all of whom were baptised at the Dutch Reformed Church of Cape Town.²⁹

The marginal lives of these slaves, free blacks and convicts 'of Ceylon' were not central to the affairs of state and hence did not figure as Trouillot has convincingly shown, at the moment of fact creation (the making of sources) and the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives)³⁰. What these fragments do suggest is that in the 18th-19th centuries there was much more movement of people of Ceylon and from Ceylon than appears in the conventional historiography. We need to access multiple archives to piece together the lives of slaves who accompanied their owners from Batavia to the Cape and individuals like forger Herman Maas who was sentenced to transportation first to Mauritius then to New South Wales where he once again engaged in forgery and fraud and was sentenced

and hanged.³¹ The next section will explore further the lives involuntary migrants made for themselves in their new locations.

The quotidian of involuntary migrants ‘of Ceylon’

Any exploration of the lives of subaltern immigrants at the Dutch Cape must take into consideration the social complexity of the settlement and the interactions between ‘lower-ranking Company employees, sailors, soldiers, servants, convicts and exiles’.³² In the quotidian there were many areas in which these various groups came into contact.

The social world of Nicolaas Ondaatje

Several caches of letters unearthed recently from the neglected files of the ‘Master of Orphan Chamber’ (deceased estates) at the Cape archives, have done much to revise our understanding of the Asian convict and slave communities taken there in the 17th and early 18th centuries. Nicolaas Jurgen Ondaatje, a Chettiar from Colombo, Ceylon employed as a book-keeper and interpreter by a Dutch Minister, and unlucky enough to be implicated in his employer’s misdemeanours and transported as a convict to the Cape in 1727 is the best known example. The 70 letters he received which were retained in the estate file created at the time of his death at the Cape in mid-1737 naturally provide more information about the lives of his family and friends in Ceylon than about his own circumstances. Passages in the letters, and additional documents subsequently discovered in the Cape archives have nevertheless enabled Herman Tiekens to piece together many revealing facets of Ondaatje’s sojourn at the Cape.³³ Nicolaas’ position as a convict in the Cape colony was ambiguous; he was able to earn money at various times as a medical practitioner, a trader and a private tutor, but did not have the official status of a

‘vrijswart,’ or Free Black. He had an unacknowledged, presumably illegitimate son, and became a slave-owner. He purchased the first slave for himself [Antony of Bengal, who arrived via Batavia in 1729] at the Cape, but his correspondence reveals that later slave acquisitions were made for him by his family and shipped to South Africa. The family in Ceylon helped him with funds in the early years of his exile – albeit urging him to measures of economy. Of particular interest is the correspondence about the clothes and cloth he asks his family to send. His family responds positively to his request to wear long shirts and an overcoat instead of the Chettiar dress. ‘You should,’ they say, ‘do what suits the local circumstances’³⁴. But apart from protection from the climate, dress was an important way of displaying one’s status in the Cape and especially distinction from enslaved people. Another letter from Nicolaas’ family mentions ‘two pieces of cloth to wear over the head’ and ‘1 pair of slippers of superior quality’³⁵. Covering one’s head was a privilege given only to non-slaves in Dutch colonies while ‘shoes, hats and horses – symbols of the master class – were important props in the theater of subordination of all slaves’.³⁶

The letters also give some insight into the relations between social convicts, slaves and local people. Seeds are sent from Ceylonese correspondents that Nicolaas, who by then has moved to the countryside, intends to sell to local farmers.³⁷ Fluent in Dutch, Tamil, Sinhala and Portuguese he could quite easily engage in commercial activities within Cape society.

Even more interesting is the light the letters shed on the slave trade from Ceylon and links with international trading networks. In his correspondence with Domingos Dias, Nicolaas makes an arrangement to have a young boy sent out to him as a servant, while Dias asks for information about a slave woman, Flora,

described as a Bengali, and very short in stature. Flora had been married to Hannibal, Dias' godson, since deceased, and both had been sold to a free burgher at the Cape by departing Governor Simonsz in 1708. Dias explained that Hannibal had sent a barrel of cabbage to him in Ceylon, which he had sold at a profit and wished to find Flora so as to reimburse her. This was a tall order after so long, but Nicolaas was able to locate her, now remarried to Karel Jansz of Bombay. As a result of the renewed contact, she and Dias set up a small-scale trading arrangement to ship wine and pickled cabbage from the Cape to Ceylon³⁸. The letters depict convicts and slaves engaging in behaviours such as commodity trades and slave purchases which historians do not generally associate with forced migrants. The relationships between these groups are moreover nuanced: in his dealings with slaves, Nicolaas appears both as owner and trader, but simultaneously also as family friend – in the case of Flora, and others.

Literacy among enslaved peoples

Another treasure of the Cape archives – the notebook of slave schoolmaster and healer, the half-creole Jan Smiesing – which includes Tamil medicinal remedies, may have been provided by Nicolaas who received Tamil medical books from his family, and is a further step towards enlarging our understanding of the hidden socio-cultural world of the Cape slave community.³⁹ The discovery and analysis of Smiesing's notebook containing samples of his copperplate writing, Tamil texts, a Christian hymn, arithmetic and personal and family information is as important for what it omits as for what it contains. Born a slave, and growing up in the notorious slave lodge of Cape town, Smiesing's notebook makes no mention of his servile status nor even of the momentous date on which he achieved his freedom via manumission. It is as if the entries in the book position Smiesing only as he

wants to perceive himself – as a person of status and learning – rather than as a man struggling against the adversity of his slave status. As the son of a slave schoolmistress in the Dutch colony it is not unusual that Jan Smiesing would take pride in, and wish to record his literacy in the Dutch language. What is more surprising or pertinent is the presence of the Tamil texts and how and where he acquired his ability to read and write them, as he presumably must have done.

Smiesing was not the only Cape slave with a demonstrated ability to read and write to a high degree of fluency. A collection of 32 letters found in the estate of freed slave Arnoldus Koevoet and his wife Anna Rebecca of Bengal who lived together in Cape Town in the 1730s, have shed further light not only on the slave/free black community at the Cape but the contacts across the Indian Ocean which their ability to read and write enabled them to maintain.⁴⁰ Among the letters received by Anna are several from her ‘young mistress’ and two from a man who had taught her the catechism, both located in Amsterdam. She also received 2 letters sent from Colombo by a man named R. Coijmans, which largely concern the exchange of gifts – handkerchiefs, linen and ginger from Ceylon in exchange for foodstuffs from the Cape – as a means of sustaining their friendship. ‘Taken together, these letters provide eloquent testimony to the existence, or emergence, of a strong sense of self and an astonishing degree of self-esteem and mutual respect among the slaves and ex-slaves who formed part of the network of correspondents’, writes Newton-King.⁴¹

Manumission, exchange and labour

Following traces of the lives of slaves of Ceylon throws light onto the diversity of the conditions of labour that prevailed. Slaves were able to earn money, they were able to buy their freedom by exchanging theirs for other slaves they

provided, and they engaged in a variety of tasks. Once manumitted former slaves 'of Ceylon' appear as owners of farm land in places like Stellenbosch. Long years of loyal labour was rewarded by manumission, with the associated promise of social mobility. Dorinda of Ceylon was freed by her burgher owner, as was August of Ceylon, freed by Johan George Lochner. The wills of some slave owners reveal various plans for slaves after death which suggests a paternalistic form of domination. Abraham Craaijwinkel stipulated that should his widow die or remarry, his slave Cupido of Ceylon was to be manumitted.⁴²

It is striking to note that many slave owners are not white Europeans but free Asians or Africans. In 1774 for example, the will of Amarentia of Bengal, a 'free black,' named Cassandra of Ceylon as one of her slaves to be freed after her death. Coridon of Ceylon was manumitted by Catharina of the Cape, in 1783 and Januarij of Paliacatte, a free black, declared his wish to emancipate his slave, September of Ceylon. Free blacks were statistically more likely to manumit their slaves than white owners, and studies have indicated that in many cases this was due to close personal relationships subsisting between such owners and their slaves.⁴³

Jacob of Ceylon's manumission is quite unusual for the reason that his female slave owner Geertruij Helena of Bengal, a 'free black,' explicitly stated that she had bought his freedom because he had been 'cohabiting with her' and due to her poor circumstances wished to be excused from paying the usual fee for doing so in 1785. Of course, it was more usual for male slave owners to be in a sexual relationship with female slaves, although this was not generally publicized. When Hendrik Canterbury made his will in 1822, however, he declared openly that he was appointing as his sole and universal heirs, 'his three natural children begotten by the late female slave Christina van Ceylon' and the free woman Eva of the Cape

together with his four natural children begotten by the said Eva'. Although all seven natural children were baptised and given his surname, some of them remained slaves at the time of his death in 1825.⁴⁴

The manumission records reveal details not just of relationships with slave owners but of slave family ties and occupations. The 1757 manumission of Eva of the Cape by burgher Noach Backer revealed, for example that the child's mother and father were Silla of Jafnapatnam and Moses of the Coast respectively. The important role of slaves as child carers in the domestic lives of the families they resided with is clear from many records. In 1763 Jansen, an ex-burgher-captain at Batavia, repatriating in the return ship 'Vosmaer' asked for a passage for a female slave, Flora of Ceylon, for the service of his wife and little daughter during the voyage. Some manumissions came with conditions attached. When Scipio from Colombo was freed by the Reverend Hermanus Specht, sailing on the Bantam, in 1691, it was made conditional on the promise that when Specht or his wife returned East, Scipio would accompany them.⁴⁵

Although slaves were extremely valuable commodities [equivalent to more than the annual working wage of a skilled man] it was not uncommon for slaves at the Cape to request their own freedom in exchange for another slave they had somehow acquired. Some women acquired means as well as freedom through marriage: Grisella van de Kaap, wife of the burgher Jan Staverinus was able to free her 13 year old son from the slave lodge by substituting 'a healthy male slave named Jeremias of Ceylon' for him.⁴⁶ Skilled slaves might also earn sufficient to purchase another slave in exchange for their own freedom. 'Johannes Kemp of Ceylon' is a good example of social mobility within the Cape slavery system. Having reportedly been 'seized' in Ceylon in 1688 and condemned to slavery, he was initially

employed on 'general works'. After five years, in 1693, he was appointed a supervisor of the lodge masons, an elite corps. In 1710 he requested the right to work his passage back to Batavia which was considered favourably on the ground that he was a mulatto [mestizo].⁴⁷

Property transactions provide an additional paper trail which sheds light on the occupations and means of living of the free blacks. Aron of Ceylon purchased the Hartenberg farm in Stellenbosch in 1736, although he died before he was able to complete payments on it, while Jan van Ceylon, also known as Jan Lui, was the co-owner of a 54 acre farm, with Marquard of Ceylon, established in 1692.⁴⁸

Available records paint a very sketchy picture of the social world of unfree people of Ceylon since they appear in the archive more often through extraordinary circumstances such as manumission than in the everyday. Whilst we encounter some of them as literate individuals, engaged in business activities and a variety of occupations, much remains unknown about their religious world, family life, eating habits, leisure. Did slaves, convicts and free blacks of Ceylon convert from Buddhism or Hinduism to Islam or Christianity? Did they continue to practice their own faith after conversion as was the case for many converts in Ceylon? The archive is silent on the feelings experienced by these individuals when they lost their freedom and were torn away from their familiar setting and transplanted to a completely alien environment. Reading acts of violence and resistance committed by people 'of Ceylon' are perhaps the only entry points into the realm of the affective.

Acts of resistance in the 18th-19th centuries

The rich body of literature on Atlantic slavery has investigated the dialectical inter-relation between ‘everyday’ and ‘revolutionary’ forms of resistance to slavery and the way the use of ‘agency’ as a framing device ‘has reduced historically and culturally acts of resistance to manifestations of a larger, abstract human capacity.’⁴⁹ In Indian Ocean slavery, for reasons that require further elucidation, slaves from other Dutch settlements such as Ceylon and Mauritius who were small in number in the general slave population appear to have played a major role in some of the most notorious acts of resistance at the Cape colony. These acts of resistance, that involved running away or taking arms to defy the domination of their masters, were rarely successful and the punishments were extreme.

In September 1709 the slave Jacob of Ceylon alias de Smit, belonging to S. Elsevier, was condemned ‘to be bound to a pole on the place of public execution, well whipt on his bare back, branded on both cheeks, to have his ears and nose cut off, to have the ears nailed to the gallows, to be rivetted in chains for life, to work as a convict for two years, and after that to be sent home to his master.’ Jacob had a habit of running away, and three months earlier had incited a number of other slaves to abscond with him, encouraging them to secure guns, powder, lead and food supplies. Jacob, the group’s self-styled ‘captain,’ stole several items of clothing, together with two pistols, two firelocks, a carbine, a lot of powder and, rather impressively, ‘300 bullets made by himself’. The assembled party killed some sheep and took them along for the journey. Jacob proved to be a stern leader, threatening to shoot or decapitate with an axe anyone proposing to turn back. After 15 days’ journey they arrived at the ‘Breede River,’ where some Malagasy slaves of the group left and returned to their masters. The remainder decided to camp out in the hills

from where they would launch raids on surrounding homesteads. They succeeded in slaughtering a cow belonging to Pieter Jordaan, but were soon captured.⁵⁰

The story of another slave rebellion led by Louis of Mauritius and runaway slave Adonis of Ceylon, is even more extraordinary. The spark was lit, in 1808, by two Irishmen, James Hooper and Michael Kelly, who initially joined Louis, and another slave, Abraham of the Cape in a plan to gather together as large a group of slaves as possible to march on Cape Town, capture a fort and call on the Governor to abolish slavery. They set out in a hired waggon and were quickly joined by Adonis, a fisherman, who had deserted from his owner two weeks earlier. The presumably light-complexioned Louis had dressed himself in a smart blue jacket with red collar and cuffs, sporting a hat with ostrich feathers, glittering epaulets and two swords. At the first farm they came to, he posed as a Spanish sea captain with his Irish officers and servant. In this way they acquired a good meal and a comfortable bed for the night from the farmer's wife. Next morning, however, the Irishmen had gone, taking the swords with them. Undeterred, Louis called the slaves of the farm together, announced that they had been freed, showing them a document which purported to declare their liberation, and carried them off in his waggon. Over the course of that day, the group visited 30 farms, gathering together more than 300 slaves, and taking several white farmers prisoner. They were soon intercepted by an armed force and routed. Within the next few days the ringleaders were all captured. Louis, Hooper, Abraham and two others were sentenced to be hung; Adonis was given a long term of imprisonment on the notorious Robben Island and Michael Kelly was sent out of the colony.⁵¹

Much of the early literature on slave revolts has pointed towards the individual and uncoordinated nature of the actions perpetrated by slaves. There was

little, it is argued, in the way of 'collective resistance'⁵². Quiescence was also explained by the prevalence of slave owner paternalism in the Cape settlement⁵³. These two episodes show, however, that many enslaved people were creative in their strategies and repertoires of resistance, bold and brave in their behaviour and purposeful in the aim they hoped to achieve. They also show, following David Scott, to what extent the violence of slavery rather than being read simply as a limiting force actually generated slave political action and informed 'the transformative agency of the slave'⁵⁴.

We also encounter slaves from Ceylon through accounts of individual acts of resistance to slavery. These could be met with equally vicious punishment, like that suffered by Andries van Ceijlon, described as a 53 year old bondsman in the service of Cape farmer Barend Buijs. His initial crime was simply to have stolen brandy and wine from the cellar. He suffered a beating for this misdemeanour but when a Khoi [Hottentot co-worker] made fun of him, Andries, believing this man to have denounced the theft, attacked him with a knife and then ran away. After ten days spent hiding out, Andries crept back to the house at night and set fire to the thatched roof before making off. He succeeded in surviving a few days more, begging food from passing shepherds, but was eventually apprehended by local cattle herders. Having confessed his crimes, Andries was sentenced on 10 February 1724 'to be taken to the place where criminal justice is usually executed here, there to be handed over to the executioner, first to have his right hand cut off and to be tied to a stake and half strangled to death, next to be scorched so that death will follow, thereupon his dead body to be taken to the outside place of execution and there to be placed onto a wheel, with the hand above the head, to remain thus until being consumed by the air and birds of heaven'.⁵⁵

The seemingly disproportionate presence of slaves ‘of Ceylon’ in such acts of resistance in the Cape colony and sporadic references to them in the criminal record may be a case of forcing the archive by historians in search of specific data. It could also be related to the climate of ‘perpetual ferment’ and discontent in the island of Ceylon from where these slaves originated, throughout the 18th and up to the mid-19th century when several serious revolts shook the Dutch east India company rule and British rule in Ceylon. Rebel ringleaders from Ceylon and other territories were often banished to Robben island and one can surmise that stories about their feats circulated in the lodge among discontented and dominated people.⁵⁶ There is however no clear evidence that the presence of convicts and political prisoners from the countries where slaves originated sowed the seeds of discontent.

The trajectory of unfree people in the nineteenth century underwent a significant change with the abolition of slavery and the beginning of the practice of indentured labour. Other trends continued : convicts were transported from Ceylon until the mid-nineteenth century and re-migrants from Ceylon – slaves in the previous century – were found among free labour in Indian Ocean locations.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the virtues in focusing on the lives of single individuals, enslaved or free who crossed distances and the ocean by reducing the scale of analysis, a strategy that the well known works of Carlo Ginsburg or Natalie Zemon Davis have clearly illustrated albeit in other contexts and periods⁵⁷. The local tells us much about global trends. This paper has extracted from the colonial archive rare mentions of slaves, political exiles and convicts from Ceylon who showed both contrasting and similar processes of mobility through the 18th and 19th centuries. Individual stories confirm that while slavery was replaced by other modes of labour

mobilisation that followed the ebb and tide of commodities, political dissenters and convicts continued to be exiled to distant territories. Archival sources become less ambiguous and more precise with relation to the identity and origin of subaltern migrants in the later period. By forcing the archive to retrieve instances of the practices of subaltern individuals and groups of Ceylon, how they lived, wrote letters, forged connections across the seas, traded with the local population, bought their freedom or violently fought for it, this paper has attempted to capture the experience of being dominated under colonial rule.

Retrieving these fleeting moments when men and women of Ceylon appear in Indian Ocean archives is a confirmation that historiography has everything to gain by moving beyond given frames of nation state (Sri Lanka) or region (South Asia). These individuals do not appear in Sri Lankan historiography except in statements by historians regarding their exile or banishment. The historian of Sri Lanka leaves these individuals to be studied by others as they cross the national boundary and the shores of the island. Theirs are ‘arrested histories’ as Stoler calls them, pasts that remain suspended in time⁵⁸.

Their histories, as this article has demonstrated, are nevertheless embedded in or entangled with global trends and tell us a broader story. Following Trivellato, the interrelationship of the local and the global through connected histories appears to be the most inspiring version of microhistory⁵⁹. In our case it has the capacity to capture the macrocosm of slavery through generalizations that draw from the small scale of the lives of enslaved people. Subramanyam’s writings on connected histories have shown this link between the global and the local and how larger processes are broken down and transformed at the local level⁶⁰. The question is whether the focus on marginal actors and single actors lends itself to the critique by

mainstream historiography of being unproductive of historical explanation. When dealing with unfree individuals there is indeed a risk in following the example of some scholars working on forced movements across the Atlantic. Johnson warns that scholars need to take some distance from the injunction to ‘give the slaves back their agency’ which is grounded in the idea of history writing as a mode of redress, of returning a ‘stolen agency’ back to enslaved people.⁶¹ In this vein the purpose of forcing the archive should be less about retrieving the agency of unfree people than an attempt to understand their practices in being and ‘becoming’ in a local context that was embedded in the global.

Notes

¹ For an analysis of the existing literature on slave voices and cultural practices see the excellent introduction in Rogers, D. *Voix d’esclaves. Antilles, Guyane et Louisiane XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*, Paris: Karthala Presse, Paris, 2015, pp. 7-13.

² There are many accounts of African slaves in the western Indian Ocean, see for example Alpers, E. A. and Hopper, M. S. "Parler En Son Nom? Comprendre Les Témoignages D’esclaves Africains Originaires De L’Océan Indien (1850-1930)", pp. 799-828.

³ Vink, M. “‘The World’s Oldest Trade’: Dutch slavery and slave trade in the Indian Ocean in the seventeenth century,”

⁴ Ekama, K. Slavery in Dutch Colombo, A Social History, MA thesis Leiden University, 2012, mentions 3 African slaves, one of whom Louison, was identified as being ‘from’ Mauritius.

⁵ Welie R. van. “Slave Trading and Slavery in the Dutch Colonial Empire: A Global Comparison”,. Pp 47-96.

⁶ Mbeki, L. and van Rossum, M., “Private slave trade in the Dutch Indian Ocean World: a study into the networks and backgrounds of the slavers and the enslaved in South Asia and South Africa”, p.5

⁷ Raben, R. Batavia and Colombo. The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities 1600-1800, Ph.D Leiden University 1996, pp. 45-48.

⁸ Ibid, p. 110

⁹ Boekhouder Generaal Batavia, Resources.huylens.knaw.nl; accessed on 13 June 2016

¹⁰ Armstrong, C.. “The Slaves 1652-1795”, in R. Elphick and H. Giliomee, eds *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820*, p.116.

¹¹ Boeseken, A. J. *Slaves and Free Blacks at the Cape 1658-1700*, Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1977.

¹² Bradlow, F.R. and Cairns, M. *The Early Cape Muslims*, Balkema, Cape Town, 1978, p. 92-97; Shell, *Children of Bondage A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope 1652-1838*, p. 43.

¹³ Raben, p. 131.

¹⁴ The inventory of George Bernard 11 December 1821, includes a reference to a 54 year old slave Malbroek van Ceylon. As this is a well-known African name, this individual may be a slave brought from there before being sold on at Ceylon Cape Archives MOOC8/38.59. See also Leibbrandt, H.C.V. *Precis Archives of the Cape of Good Hope*, Letters Despatched, 1696-1708, pp. 212-3.

¹⁵ ‘A Relation of a Voyage to and through the East-Indies, from the Year 1675-1683’ by Christopher Schweitzer in Fayle, C.E. *Voyages to the East Indies*, pp. 255-256

- ¹⁶ British Library, India Office Records (IOR) P/3/46, Affidavits of Hugh Moore and John Ramsay respecting Capt'n Peter Horrebow, 1 June 1789, pp 16-21; National Archives, London, CO 54/14, fol. 127r – Statement of Expenditure incurred in purchasing Slaves at Bombay & transporting them to Colombo, 1789.
- ¹⁷ Cape Archives MOOC8/40.36 Slave Inventory of Arend J. van Breda and his wife Elizabeth Petronella Ehlers, 1795.
- ¹⁸ Armstrong, J.C. "The Ceylon Connection: Convicts and Exiles from Ceylon Sent to the Cape of Good Hope during the Dutch East India Company Period" (paper presented to the interdisciplinary conference Colonial Places, Convict Spaces: Penal Transportation in Global Context, c. 1600–1940, University of Leicester, 9–10 December 1999).
- ¹⁹ Despatch no 40 from Batavia, 19 Jan 1697, in Leibbrandt, *Letters Despatched, 1696-1708*
- ²⁰ Ibid., No. 21, p. 1. From Colombo.[1695].
- ²¹ His tomb became a site of pilgrimage for Muslims in South Africa. See Bradlow F.R. and Cairns, M. *The Early Cape Muslims*.
- ²² Bradlow, p. 21-22, pp. 28-35 and pp. 61-79.
- ²³ Chatterjee, I. 'Colouring Subalternity: Slaves, Concubines and Social Orphans in Early Colonial India', pp. 49-97.
- ²⁴ For a detailed discussion of the several thousand convicts transported from Ceylon, the Cape and Mauritius during the course of the 19th century see Anderson, C. "Sepoys, Servants and Settlers: convict transportation in the Indian Ocean, 1787-1945" in Ian Brown and Frank Dikotter, eds, *Cultures of Confinement: a History of the Prison in Global Perspective*, pp. 185-220.
- ²⁵ Anderson, C. 'Convict Socio-Economic Autonomy in 19th Century Mauritius', in Marina Carter et al, *Colouring the Rainbow: Mauritian society in the making*, pp 61-78; Anderson, C. *Subaltern Lives Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920*, pp. 44-45
- ²⁶ Armstrong J. C. 'The Slaves 1652-1795', in ed. Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1820*, p. 84
- ²⁷ Shell, R. *Children of Bondage A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope 1652-1838*, Johannesburg: Witwatersrand UP, 2001, p. 151
- ²⁸ Loos, J. *Echoes of Slavery: Voices from South Africa's Past*, 38-40; Leibbrandt, Memorials volume 1.
- ²⁹ Boeseken, A. J. Slaves and Free Blacks at the Cape 1658-1700, pp. 82, 132.
- ³⁰ Trouillot, M R *Silencing the Past. Power and the Production of History*, p.26.
- ³¹ Anderson, *Subaltern Lives Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920*, 2012, p.46.
- ³² Nigel Worden, 'New Approaches to VOC History in South Africa', 2007, pp. 3-18, 10
- ³³ The findings were published by Tiekens first in "Letters dealing with the slave trade from Ceylon: The Ondaatje correspondence, 1728 to 1737" and subsequently in a monograph: Tiekens, *Between Colombo and the Cape. Letters in Tamil, Dutch and Sinhala, Sent to Nicolaas Ondaatje from Ceylon, Exile at the Cape of Good Hope (1728-1737)*
- ³⁴ ibid., p. 82
- ³⁵ ibid, p. 96
- ³⁶ Ordinances sanctioned sartorial distinction in very specific ways. In Galle for instance the VOC issued in 1664 an 'ordinance forbidding the wearing of head-coverings by Muslim slaves'. See Ekama, 2012, p.38.
- ³⁷ Tiekens, 2015, p. 162
- ³⁸ ibid, p. 131, 149
- ³⁹ R. Shell and A. Dick., "Jan Smiesing, Slave Lodge Schoolmaster and Healer, 1697-1734" 128-52 in Worden, Nigel, ed., *Cape Town between East and West: Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town*, pp 128-52
- ⁴⁰ Worden, N. "Cape slaves in the paper empire of the VOC", *Kronos* vol.40 n.1 Cape Town Nov. 2014, 23-40.
- ⁴¹ Newton-King, S 'Family, Friendship and Survival among Freed Slaves' in Worden (ed.), *Cape Town Between East and West*, pp. 153-75.
- ⁴² Leibbrandt, H.C.V. *Precis of the Archives of the Cape of Good Hope*, W. A. Richards & Sons, Capetown. Memorials vols 1 and 2, 1896-1914.
- ⁴³ Bozarth, D.C. 'Burgher, Boer and Bondsman: A Survey of Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope under the Dutch East India Company, 1652-1795', p. 395.
- ⁴⁴ Cape Archives MOOC8/40.14 Hendrik Canterbury 2 May 1825.
- ⁴⁵ Boeseken, A J, *Slaves and Free Blacks at the Cape 1658-1700*, p. 59, p. 179-80.
- ⁴⁶ Leibbrandt, *Precis*, op cit., *Memorials* volumes 1 and 2.

- ⁴⁷ Shell, *Children of Bondage* 2001, p. 181. Another means of obtaining freedom at the Cape was to provide 30 years' service at the slave lodge. However, historian Robert Shell found only 3 examples of slaves who achieved this; their regions of origin were respectively Madagascar, Ceylon and Bengal, *Children of Bondage* p. 375.
- ⁴⁸ Bozarth, D.C. 'Burgher, Boer and Bondsman, p. 545; Leibbrandt, *Memorials* volume 2.
- ⁴⁹ Johnson, "On Agency", p. 117
- ⁵⁰ Leibbrandt, H.C.V., *Precis* p. 198-9.
- ⁵¹ Ross, *Cape of Torrents: Slavery and resistance in South Africa*, 97- 104.
- ⁵² Ross, chaps 1,8,9 and Armstrong and Worden 1988, 157-162;
- ⁵³ Shell, 2001.
- ⁵⁴ Scott, D. *Conscripts of Modernity; The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, p. iii
- ⁵⁵ CJ 784 Sententiën, 1717-1725, ff. 225-30, reproduced in Worden, Nigel and Groenewald, Gerald, eds. 2005. *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705-1794*.
- ⁵⁶ Jayawardena, K. *Perpetual ferment. Popular Revolts in Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th centuries*, pp. 58, 61
- ⁵⁷ Ginzburg, C. "Latitude, Slaves, and Bible: An Experiment in Microhistory,"; Zemon Davis, N. *The Return of Martin Guerre*, 1982.
- ⁵⁸ Stoler, A. *Along the archival grain. Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*, p. 33; see also MacGranahan, C. *Arrested Histories. Tibet, the CIA and Memories of a Forgotten War*,
- ⁵⁹ Trivellato, F. "Microstoria/Microhistoire/Microhistory," pp. 130-131.
- ⁶⁰ Subrahmanyam, S. "Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia"
- ⁶¹ Johnson, 'On Agency', 2003, p. 119.

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